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The Liberal Art — Vision and Form

John Ficca

Illinois Wesleyan University

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To reach an understanding of something it is necessary that one must, at some time, have deeply loved it, even if only for a passing moment. This is certainly true of those who devote the energies of their vocational lifetime to any one of the arts. When was this magic moment of enchantment for me? Did it happen somewhere in that period from the tender and confusing age of eight to thirteen (ending in "The Summer of '42") when I acted as selector and interpreter for my frail, sainted, Italian speaking aunt-guardian of a whole host of Dick Powell, Ann Miller and Bing Crosby movie musicals?

Or was it the fact that as a high school senior I captivated audiences in a major supporting role in Hildegard Dolson's *We Shook The Family Tree*? This along with being voted "class eyes," earned for me the yearbook distinction of "dramatics" as a destined career.

These experiences must certainly have had some influence on the nurturing of my desire for dramatic production—I still enjoy working with plays like *You Can't Take It With You* immensely. With no intention of establishing a legend to rival that of Lana Turner being discovered in a soda fountain in Hollywood, I can fix my moment on the first reading of a great play. The first time I read *Hamlet* I was enthralled by the vision of the poet in a form that was new to me. Here was Captain Marvel, Johnny Weissmuller, Colin P. Kelly, Doc Blanchard, Glenn Davis and Humphrey Bogart for heroics, Hoot Gibson for honor, Robert Frost for poetry and Gandhi for compassion and wisdom—all encompassed in one event. Furthermore, I experienced a John Barrymore acting the play, even though to that time I had never seen a Shakespearean work produced.

The years between have tempered that early image, but by no means diminished it. And here, at this moment, as I characterize Drama as "The Liberal Art," I realize that I am more sophisticated with regard to many of its tenets than are most of you, but at the same time and more importantly, that we share in common Drama's most striking quality: The power to extend ourselves, through imagination, beyond the day-to-day mechanics of life.

To label Drama "The Liberal Art" may seem a downright presumptuous assumption. I am by no means implying that this art can substitute for the broad spectrum of learning represented in the humanities, social and natural sciences, nor that it is in kind necessarily superior to its sister arts. Neither, however, do I wish to be condescending as a ploy to keep the goodwill of my faculty colleagues who might be prone to turn off at this point. Drama is "The Liberal Art" simply because the trivium derivatives (logic, grammar and rhetoric along with the graphic arts, music and mimetic action) are its mode of expression and every other field of study and activity is its subject matter.

To be sure, the practice of any activity with so broad a scope is laden with pitfalls. Fortunately, since Drama is both a temporal and spatial art, its individual works are bounded by reasonable limits of length and subject matter treatment: unfortunately, most fledgling playwrights, like beginning preachers, ignore both restrictions in the heat and passion of their personal calling. The mature dramatic poet takes these limitations in stride and finds himself struggling with the more difficult problems of unity and consistency. "Don't bite off more than you can chew, Charlie Brown, the bad taste coming up is a lot worse than the good taste going down." Enter the critic, guardian of the rules and arbiter of good taste.

It is inevitable that no sooner is something created than there are those immediately available to pass judgment on it and raise questions about it. God has had this problem ever since he created the earth: the playwright and dramatic productionists have had it since the early 5th century BC.

Of major concern to the theorists and critics of the early Greek Theatre, the fountainhead of the art in our western culture, was what its proper function should be. Should it be utilitarian in some fashion—or merely a pleasure-giving, aesthetic device? "To teach or to please," in other words, has been the basic question posed from the very beginning. "To teach pleasantly" has, in general, been the compromised answer arrived at by the majority of theorists. But for some the compromise has not been satisfactory, with the result that dramatic art has had a distinguished history of being alternately condemned and defended by some rather prominent thinkers.

Plato was one of the first to express definite negative feelings about the way poetry, and particularly dramatic poetry, was used in Greek education. During the 6th, 5th, and 4th centuries BC, poetry was the cornerstone of Greek learning and he deplored this situation. His contention was that it was produced by inspiration rather than by a rational process and could not be trusted. "Poetry is the mother of lies" and though it may serve man as an emotional outlet, it was necessary for the Philosopher-King to take over the function of serving him as teacher and leader.

Later, the Roman, Horace, was to deal with the question of the poet being inspired by the Muse in a more practical fashion. His contention was that the writer was indeed inspired but that he must be guided by a rational process as well and if you come upon an individual in a deep pit who claims in his raging that he is caught in the grips of the poetic Muse, leave him there—he is probably dangerous.

It was, however, Plato's brightest student who was to offer the first comprehensive and influential defense of dramatic poetry and to do so in a manner decidedly contrary to his master's teachings. Aristotle contended that poetic tragedy not only was a reliable dispenser of truth, but was indeed capable of

transcending empirical knowledge to a superior level of truth. In short, he responded that the poet could be trusted to render truth and guidance because of his insights (vision) and because he did not in his form necessarily pretend to the factual and rational as a means to his ends. As long as the poet was consistent within the individual work itself, that creation could be as reliable as any of man's other forms of inquiry. Inconsistency is legitimate so long as the poet remains consistently inconsistent within the form. Thus, the poet is liberated to make use of any subject matter—the factual and the imaginative. Of course, he strongly implied that much depends on the quality of the poet—Sophocles was his model and *Oedipus Rex* his favorite play.

The flow out of this Greek fountainhead of dramatic theory and practice has ranged ever since from muddled to crystal clear. The Romans, distrusting almost every cultural legacy the Greeks offered as being potentially corrupting, used the medium merely for entertainment through the vehicle of formula domestic comedies performed by slaves. This kind of literary Neil Simon approach, incidentally, has not changed a great deal in structure from that day to this. From this extreme of Drama "to please," and after virtual extinction during the Dark Ages, medieval churchmen revived Drama as an instrument by which "to teach." Since that time there has been continuity, with the drift from favor to disfavor depending on the social, religious and political climate of the place and time. Not only is Drama liberal in its use of subject matter, but by tradition it has freely touched the nerve center of every major controversial issue around and has scarcely ever found itself in the conservative camp.

The Renaissance concerned itself with a careful examination of every aspect of Drama and focused particularly on the question of its function relative to its several kinds, namely comedy and tragedy. And here the inevitable happened: In both theory and practice it became obvious in many quarters that if tragedy and comedy were so great individually, they would be wonderful together. Thus, melodrama was born—born and nurtured in every respect. There were immediate questions of style and good taste raised about this new form as is apparent in this passage (from one of melodrama's most sophisticated originators) dealing with acting specifically and the whole nature of Drama's function generally:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at first and now, was and is, to hold, as 't were, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others¹

This still holds up as a pretty good basic acting lesson, even today in this age of the picture-image real as the standard. When Shakespeare wrote it he must have intended it for specific individuals. The marvel is that this piece of advice has had universal meaning for the acting profession as a whole even though, as individuals, actors find very little in it that could possibly have a bearing on their own style.

In the 17th century it became the dramatic literary fashion to spell out directly what was on one's mind through the use of prologues and epilogues. Since it was an age of refinement and much consequence, there was no limit to what might be covered in one or the other. Vanbrugh, for example, speaks candidly on the purpose of Drama in his prologue to *The Provoked Wife*:

'Tis the intent and business of the stage
To copy out the follies of the age,
To hold to every man a faithful glass,
And shew him of what species he's an ass.²

The glass is held up and we see our own reflections in Mr. Vulture, Simon Pure, Sir Tunbelly Clunsky, Lord Foppington and Dapperwit. In this Restoration comedy, as most others, the emphasis is on a display of wit and manners in the moment-to-moment playing of the play, but there is also an underlying vision of implied moral instruction. See what we do as individual characters and then act in a contrary fashion if you wish to avoid our foolishness.

Here then is the essence of the poet-playwright visionary, able to show the follies of the actions of men in his own age and, at the same time, to become a seer and prophet of the consequences of those actions. It is a paradox that this same visionary has dealt with illusion and fancy as his main means of communication in order to reach out for a higher level of truth. It is a further paradox that this same being has often been unable to cope with the very truth he discovered and revealed. He often has become like Dylan Thomas, the man who put his finger on reality but could not face it, even as he admonished us to "...not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light."³

However, it is proper to look to some of those who were able to cope with what they saw. By the time the mature William Shakespeare had reached the point of writing *King Lear*, he saw clearly the relationship of the major forces of the age which had converged on his tiny island and, indeed, his world. The old-new order of Classicism was pressing hard against the established traditions of the medieval way of seeing and doing things. Aristotle had emerged as the high priest of the new order which continued to grow from the bias established by Humanism and which would ultimately reach a crescendo in Rationalism.

King Lear, early in the first scene of the play, announces his retirement and parcels out the land with these seemingly wise and benevolent words:

Know we have divided
In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death.⁴

The poet's view is clear, but Lear's own vision is clouded, because his act is in defiance to the laws of church and state and nature. He gives what is not his to give and abdicates what is not his to abdicate, and every member of that Elizabethan audience understood and waited to see the terrible retribution his action would surely bring. They also knew and trusted that the form used by the poet would allow them to experience the working out of the consequences and that both their intellects and emotions would be satisfied.

Some 60 years later, the would-be tragic actor and writer, Molière, had finally accepted one of life's little maxims, "nothing succeeds like success," and he became resigned to producing comedies for his own time and the time ever since. He was especially fond of showing how excesses of any sort lead to absurd behavior. Let's take, for example, one of his favorite themes—affectedness in learning: In *The Precious Damsels*, one of them remarks, "People of quality know everything without learning anything."⁵

To add credence to the statement: "I assure you that a learned fool is more foolish than an ignorant fool," Molière allows Clitandre to prove the point to one of "the learned ladies" in the play by the same name:

I am quite agreeable that a woman shall be informed about everything, but I cannot allow her the shocking passion for acquiring learning in order to be learned. When she is asked questions, I like her often to know how not to know the thing she does know.⁶

In the same manner, he has his Would-Be-Gentleman, Monsieur Jourdain, arrive at earth shattering self-realizations like: "Gracious me! I've been talking prose for the last forty years and have never known it."⁷

Molière is the unquestioned champion of dramatic comedy. He created the popular comedy as we know it today; his own work is still vital and universal.

More recently, a Norwegian from an obscure background touched at the core of what has become one of today's burning issues. Henrik Ibsen made no speeches concerning the rights of women and seemingly did not support the movement which, although fledgling, was nevertheless gaining some momentum during his time. Yet he obviously understood and had little sympathy with the blatant discrepancies which reduced women to little more than playthings in the male dominated Victorian society. In his play, *A Doll's House*, he produced a statement in dramatic form which was at once personally and individually that of

Nora Helmer and at the same time universally that of every woman stifled by what has come to be known as her “traditional role”.

John Gassner describes the initial impact made by the play:

When its heroine, Nora, left her home in search of self-development it seemed as if the sanctity to marriage had been flouted by a playwright treading the stage with cloven-feet...he was not content with pleading. He took the offensive instead, stripping masculine egotism to the bone and depriving a conventional “doll’s house” type of marriage of all its romantic and sentimental frippery. And he climaxed the awakening of his heroine not with the expected reconciliation of domestic drama, but with Nora’s closing the door on her husband, home and marriage. An anarchist’s pistol shot could not have reverberated more frighteningly in the Victorian world than the closing of that door.⁸

In a recent issue of *Life* magazine the cover shows a picture of a woman named Wanda Adams; in small black letters to the left of the picture it reads “left home and family for a new life.” Above the picture in bold red letters it says “Dropout Wife, A Striking Phenomenon.” The whole article reads like a factual paraphrase of what Ibsen had his husband and wife saying to one another almost a hundred years ago. Take as example this exchange between Torvald and Nora just as she is about to leave:

Torvald: It’s shocking. This is how you would neglect your most sacred duties.

Nora: What do you consider my most sacred duties?

Torvald: Do I need to tell you that? Are they not your duties to your husband and your children?

Nora: I have other duties just as sacred.

Torvald: That you have not. What duties could those be?

Nora: Duties to myself.

Torvald: Before all else, you are a wife and a mother.

Nora: I don’t believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you are—or, at all events that I must try and become one. I know quite well Torvald, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer content myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think over things for myself and get to understand them.⁹

The point is simply this, Ibsen’s statement is no more valid than that made in the article; but it is far more vital as a living enactment of the truth, an enactment which has stood the test of time and which will be revived again and again long

after the magazine has been tucked away and forgotten in library archives. The dramatic form will keep it alive as an individual statement and the universal truth of the vision will keep it vital.

Another of today's sharp issues centers on the rape of nature growing from our hunger to have more of everything with which to feed affluence. More than 70 years Anton Chekhov had the physician Astroff speak to the problem:

You can heat stoves with peat moss, and build barns with stones.
...Russian woods are creaking under the ax, millions of trees perish, dwellings of beasts and birds are emptied, rivers go shallow and dry, wonderful landscapes vanish, never to be brought back again, and all because lazy man hasn't sense enough to bend down and pick up fuel from the ground.... He must be a reckless barbarian to burn this beauty in his stove, destroy what we cannot create again. Man is endowed with intellect and creative powers so that he may multiply what is given to him, but up to now he has not created, he has destroyed. Forests are fewer and fewer, rivers dry up, game becomes extinct, the climate is ruined, and every day the earth gets poorer and uglier.¹⁰

These lines from *Uncle Vanya* show remarkable insight to the question of ecology and as such are ample support for the role of the playwright as visionary. But there is far more here. The key phrase is "lazy man hasn't sense enough to bend down and pick up fuel from the ground," and the key word is "lazy." Coupled with the repeated allusions to boredom (which are both stated and shown dramatically throughout the play), they point ominously to the sickness which had struck the Russian society of the day and would ultimately lead to the revolution.

Chekhov saw clearly that the aristocracy had lost its will to find satisfaction in useful work; that it was living on and sucking dry what those of the class had built up before, with no attempts to wisely replenish. In each of his plays he issues the same warnings in a vain attempt to awaken his fellows to the fatal course they followed. The vision was there but the will was not, and disaster resulted.

The present climate of theatre in general and the American Theatre specifically is decidedly pessimistic. "The theatre is dead or dying" is a familiar slogan; "the form is no longer viable" is another and "commercialism has emasculated the art" still another. The follow-up argument is that the explosion of the mass media—radio, the cinema, television—has relegated this tired old form to the role, at one extreme, of an experimental plaything indulged in by intellectuals of the avant-garde (which no one else understands) or, at the other extreme, to that of an exclusive arena for the current fad of permissiveness in the "real life" exposure of skin, hair, and naughty language (which everyone

understands).

There is, of course, some validity to all of this. But those who are ready to sound the death knell for Drama are straining at the rope with very little possibility of satisfaction. They have no vision beyond this moment and no understanding of what the history of this art form tells. There is simply no substitute for the intimacy which the live stage gives. The mimetic creations of the media do not replace the theatre; they are derivatives of it and as such make use of its tested methods of directing emotional responses. But missing from them are those dimensions, both spatial and spiritual, which make theatre a unique, living encounter.

On the other hand, there is no denying that these same mass media have means of translating human experiences into art forms, which the theatre cannot individually achieve. The movies, for example, have recently shown a remarkable potential for subjective revelation (which is in tune with the writings of novelists like Joyce, and the works of abstract painters) and the ability of doing so for a wide and diverse audience. But all such efforts to date must be counted as beginning experiments, primarily because no single force has emerged to adequately fulfill the potential.

Likewise the whole of our present century has seen no end to theatrical experimentation in search of a new and substantive form for its time. We have moved from Expressionism to Epic to Absurdism to the Living Theatre without finding an acceptable contemporary vehicle for "the liberal art." What has yet to emerge is a Shakespeare of the cinema, an Ibsen of the tube, a Chekhov of the new theatre, or, better still, one who can take all of these implements and mold them into an effective form for us.

We should be optimistic that such a force will appear; indeed, it may be among us right now. I suspect Shakespeare expresses as well as anyone ever has what the impact of the realization of being finite really is:

Our revels now are ended: these our actors—
As I foretold you—were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And like the baseless fabric of this vision
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial pageant-faded,
Leave not a rack behind: We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."¹¹

If I even began to enumerate the varied interpretations this passage from *The Tempest* has had since its inception, we would be here well into tomorrow, a prospect, I assure you, much more painful for me than for you. I like to regard this passage, at least in part, as Shakespeare's own vision of what was happening to the theatre as he knew it. There is implied faith here that though what is good may fade when its time is spent, an entity just as significant for another time will replace it. Molière's arrival in the next half century certainly bears this out for the theatre.

In the summer of '42, at 13, I had just begun to reach out toward that first experience with Drama which led me, in part, to this place tonight. Now at 42 and fully prepared to "rage, rage against the fading of the light" for a long time, I am nevertheless beginning to suspect that I am perhaps not that Messiah for the new theatre. But a possibility just as exciting comes with each new recruit to the study of "the liberal art," within this place dedicated to the liberal arts. Not necessarily the possibility that one individual will emerge as the shining light, but that collectively they will all add a measure to the vision, and vitality to the form. Friends of Wesleyan, you are here tonight encouraging that possibility from this faculty, and I salute you for it.

- ¹ *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare, Act III, Sc ii.
- ² *The Provoked Wife*, John Vanbrugh, Prologue
- ³ "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night," Dylan Thomas from *Selected Poems*
- ⁴ *King Lear*, William Shakespeare, Act I, Sc ii.
- ⁵ *The Precious Damsels*, Molière, Act II, Sc i.
- ⁶ *The Learned Ladies*, Molière, Act I, Sc iii
- ⁷ *The Would-Be Gentleman*, Molière, Act II, Sc iv.
- ⁸ *Four Great Plays by Ibsen*, John Gassner, editor, Bantam Classic edition (New York, 1959). Introduction, viii.
- ⁹ *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen, Act III.
- ¹⁰ *Uncle Vanya*, Anton Chekhov, Act I.
- ¹¹ *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare, Act IV, Sc i.